Author's Angle

Bearing in mind the dynamism of developments both in social life (in particular Post–Communism) and social discourse (in particular Political Correctness), and wishing to avoid misunderstandings, it seems expedient to make explicit a few assumptions in this paper. The term "politics" and its derivatives is used in the narrow sense, meaning activities to do with the direct wielding of public power, or of state power, be it central or local. This approach is closely tied to the main thrust of the paper, which is interested only in such characteristics of political behaviour in Bulgaria after 1989 that have clearly elevated – or debased – the quality of democracy in Bulgaria. This, of course, leaves out numerous important activities of governing, party acts and citisens' initiatives, which are outside the scope of this study.

From the Fall of 1947 to the Fall of 1989 Bulgaria was an (imperfect) totalitarian state, in the sense that the state did attempt to govern as much of the lives of its subjects as it could, while, at the same time, depriving them of virtually any say in state matters. The most significant social division was that between "the governing" (the "haves" of
political power), and "the governed" – the "have nots".

The political fact that the governed had no power resulted in the socio–psychological phenomenon of mass fear. The governed would fear the governing, and this fear would normally become the basic framework of their social and individual behaviour. It is just this type of political and social dichotomy that was ended in Bulgaria in the period November 1989 – November 1991. The tools were so simple that they were formulated as early as at the Round Table Talks (between the still ruling Communist Party and the Opposition) in early 1990: a multi–party system, based on universal suffrage; and a market economy, based on private property. That was the sum definition of democratisation at that point. It must be made clear that this process was supposed to be initiated centrally, by the government, it being seen – after years of centralisation – as the only body that could handle such an immense task.

These considerations form the basis of interest in political behaviour stricto sensu in its relevance to the democratisation of the state. The transformation of a totalitarian state into a non–totalitarian one has been so far the paramount goal of the changes in Bulgaria.

A last caveat seems pertinent: defining this process as democratisation makse use of the Round–Table terms cited above. It looks as if a swing of the pendulum worldwide has pushed societies of different cultures and expectations towards "democracy". But, were we to try to define this democratic trend on the basis of the features of the "developed" (Western? Anglo–Saxon? European?) democracies, we would end in the inanity of a Kirkpatrick–type conclusion: "Democracy is part of ours, and they are not us, therefore..." It seems more promising – at least theoretically – to try the inductive alternative. This would mean establishing, on a country–by–country basis, the local political and/or social meaning of "democratisation", and then measure progress (if any) by such a locally derived yardstick. We could also, of course, fish for

similarities,but we would then most probably catch just a few general trends, which would not be of much help if we try to explain or predict local process.

It could be safely argued that the "world democratic tendency" comprises some universal characteristics (these vary according to schools of thought), such as: redistribution of power to benefit the individual at the expense of the state; division of state power rather than its accumulation in the hands of a dictator; rationality of governance guaranteed by informed and informing media; and an ideology of freedom rather than an ideology of equality. Yet such generalities do not lead to an understanding why, for example, a Nigerian sociologist said some time ago that a military coup would help democratisation in his country. On the face of it, a coup is not a pro–democratic gesture; but I'd rather trust this judgement of the Nigerian colleague than dismiss it on grounds of definition.

Behavioural Circumstances: the Consensus

Our subject matter naturally seems to fall into two distinct types of behaviour: that of the post–communist "governing" group, and that of the "governed". In the new circumstances, however, both groups began by displaying behavioural similarities, thus making distinctions difficult at this point.

Both demonstrated a mixture of behavioural patterns borrowed from:

(a) the non–democratic years (Turkish authoritarianism – until 1878;
Csarist authoritarianism – 1934 to 1944; communist dictatorship – 1947 to 1989), and

(b) the period of relative democracy (1879 – 1934).

This mixed common heritage of the two major groups in society largely accounts for the particular – and sometimes peculiar – ends and means of the Bulgarian transition. It should be noted that in 1989 – 1990 there was a tacit consensus among both governing and governed as to the overarching goal: that the totalitarian system should be destroyed. The means to this end were not a matter of consensus as they were not very clear to anybody. But there was, again, consensus on one vital limit: no shedding of blood should be involved. Apparently, the public had come to equate violence with the old system, and nobody could envisage it as a tool of change away from that system.

The first free elections in June 1990 signalled that the first goal – bloodless emergence from the old regime – had been achieved. A second implicit consensus then emerged: that a radical economic reform should begin. The limit of this: anything but starving people. Then, by the fall of 1992, a third consensus gradually formed, this time on foreign relations: that Bulgaria should engage in a war on the Balkans only in case that it were directly invaded by a foreign power. This attitude functions as the "foreign complement" to the domestic "no blood" consensus. With some optimism, it may be concluded that the Bulgarian public has learned a basic negative lesson from its totalitarian experience: namely, that it does not pay to kill people in order for society to achieve a positive goal.

One of the more tangible signs, in 1990, of the end of totalitarianism was the disappearance of fear. After the elections, perceived as fair and democratic, the "governed" stopped being afraid of the "governing". This was all the more remarkable, as the "governing" circle remained the same – at least in terms of image. In fact, a narration of the way the ex–communists were forced into retreat – having won elections – illustrates an entirely new awareness on the part of the "governed".

To begin with, it was the ex–communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) who won the elections (with 47 per cent of the votes to 38 per cent for the major competitor, the Union of Democratic Forces – UDF). Yet the "governed" behaved as if the Socialist Party had in fact lost the elections. This was true for both the electorate of the opposition and – more significantly – for the electorate of the BSP itself.

What is more, it was true even of the BSP government. Its Ministers felt very illegitimate and behaved accordingly, creating the impression of lack of resolution and a kind of veiled guilt. Initially, they tried to draw the opposition UDF into a coalition government; the UDF promptly declined the offer. Then the BSP's President, Petar Mladenov, was charged by the opposition with undemocratic behaviour for something he had allegedly said in private (the famous debate: "Did he, didn't he say, 'It is better for the tanks to come'?"). He denied the charge. Evidence was produced exposing him as a a liar – and after a student sit–in and some rather mild and peaceful street demonstrations he resigned, less than a month after the BSP victory.

A stalemate followed in Parliament, because a two–thirds majority was required to elect a new President. Ultimately, the BSP climbed down and accepted the candidate of the UDF, its then Chairman Dr Zheliu Zhelev. With BSP votes the dissident philosopher became President. Five months after the elections, the UDF attacked the BSP government without any spectacular charge. There were some demonstrations and the UDF–affiliated trades unions threatened a national strike. The socialist government fell, and a provisional government was established, with strong UDF presence (the UDF had a Vice Prime Minister, and Ministers of Economics and Finance). The "governing class", which for Bulgarians at that time was synonymous with "communists", was in visible total retreat.

During this series of events in the summer and Fall of 1990, at some stage the "governed" realised for the first time in their lives that their free vote had made them partners to state power. After this point the totalitarian dichotomy of governed vs. governing stopped making sense. The post–communist cleavage, which structures this analysis, is the opposition of party vs. electorate.

Why parties, rather than the "political class" or "power elite"? There are at least two reasons for this. First is the simple fact that there is no longer one, but many parties. This represents the most momentous change from the past. (And many they were: about 120 political parties were formed by the end of 1990.) In the eyes of the public, for the first time people in power were no longer an opaque and alien "they": they were a group which was split along clear party lines, known to "us", and dependent on "our" vote. To dissolve all of this into a common pool called "political elite" would mean to miss the new perception of politics that Bulgarians developed in 1990–1991 – and, of course, to miss the new reality.

Parties are, second, the medium through which individuals reach into the state as a whole, since the parties control the legislative, executive and judiciary. The fact that even the trades unions have on several significant occasions acted like political parties highlights the point: at present, for better or for worse, parties are the major instruments of Bulgarian democracy.

Parties Legitimacy: Authoritarianism

It was assumed that parties who serve the cause of democracy, in order to be legitimate, should be themselves democratic. It was soon discovered, however, that the ubiquitous vernacular definition of "democratic" – "unlike what it was under communism" – is difficult to apply to parties. Some features of the new parties turned out to be very similar to the old Communist Party, yet this fact did not automatically make them illegitimate. Besides, double standards are usually applied when judging the legitimacy of one's "own" party and that of the "others". A consideration of the party system as a whole is a useful entry into this problematic.

Elections in 1990 and 1991 have shown that many parties are formed, about half of them participate in elections, and very few get into Parliament. This means, on the one hand, that besides some abuses of the media on the part of eccentric would–be politicians, the electorate retains a healthy conservatism and is not swayed easily by populist rhetoric. On the other hand, many voters end up without representation in Parliament, as their votes go to parties who are unable to pass the 4 per cent Parliamentary threshold demanded by the existing electoral system.

This was the case in the 1991 general elections. A purely proportional system was adopted for the distribution of the 240 parliamentary seats. Sixty–one parties put up candidates, of which 31 were grouped in 9 electoral coalitions. The UDF got 34.36 per cent of the vote; the BSP coalition attained 33.14 per cent; the party of the ethnic Turks, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, weighed in at 7.55 per cent. All the others remained below 4 per cent; of them, two agrarian parties got 3.86 and 3.44, while two UDF splinter groups achieved 3.20 and 2.81 per cent of the vote.

Including non–voters, this means that about one–third of the electorate was not represented in Parliament. Consequently, the legitimacy of Parliament and the government, despite some initial democratic euphoria, was not high from the very beginning. The BSP had the complicated task of balancing the contradictory requirements of avoiding change, so as to retain its electorate, and of changing, in order to acquire democratic legitimacy. It quickly opened up its governing structures and purged them of the communist "old guard". As a result, the party became fairly decentralised in appearance. In reality, power inside its structures was not threatened from below. While at the top of the Socialist Party decisions were taken after fairly normal deliberation, rank–and–file members would usually react to them following the old pattern: top–level decisions are treated as unquestionable orders from above. The party changed its name from Communist to Socialist, but that remained the only major symbolic gesture of change. It did not dissociate itself from the Bulgarian Communist Party tradition, dating from 1891; and despite repeated urging (both from inside and outside the party) throughout 1990, it did not offer an "apology" to the Bulgarian people for the 45 years of its rule after 1944.

When it changed its name, a negligible group seceded to continue under the name Bulgarian Communist Party. This groups has remained marginal in politics. In 1993, there was another split, when one of the more popular of the younger Socialist leaders, Alexander Tomov, decided to go it alone, forming a "Citizens' Union for the Republic", without being able to take practically any BSP electorate with him. A social–democratic faction within the party continues to be tolerated. The refusal to criticise its communist past, and the splits at its periphery, slowed the process of the BSP's legitimisation – but has enabled the Socialists to keep most of their party's electorate. By the end of 1993 even its legitimacy problems found a solution. Opinion polls revealed that the BSP was finaly seen as a legitimate political party both by the electorate at large and by the UDF's own voters. There was one caveat: the BSP's current legitimacy goes as far as participation in the political process, but does not include its taking executive power. This public opinion is not prepared to approve. The UDF was established at the end of 1989 as a loose coalition of parties and formations which, by the time of the Round Table three months later, had developed tacitly into a close–knit coalition. This development was chiefly a reaction to the continuing unity of the still formidable communists.

The Union was composed of two main types of formations. The first were groups and movements that had been in active opposition to the dictatorship in 1987–1989. These had no experience of party politics and included groups such as the Ecoglasnost environmentalists, the Club for Glasnost and Democracy (which ultimately produced the first UDF President, Dr Shelev), the Podkrepa Independent Trade Union, the Association for Defence of Human Rights, and the Independent Student Association. The second type comprised some traditional (for the pre–communist period) Bulgarian political parties which had been revived right after the fall of the dictatorship and became co–founders of the UDF. Of these, the UDF housed the resuscitated Social–Democratic Party, the Radical Democratic Party, and the Agrarian Union. A little later, the revived Democratic Party also joined. These older "party" people proved to be better professional politicians than the oppositionists of the 1980s.
It soon began to look as if the latter would have to become more party–like, or leave the UDF and the power struggle. They had popularity, but manifestly lacked the structures for making politics; they also lacked an adequate attitude towards power. Repeatedly, they had declared that they were only interested in attaining those limited issues on which they had been formed and on which they had campaigned, and were not after gaining political power per se. Moreover, a considerable part of their popularity was due exactly to their declared intention to keep off state power, for that kind of power was still associated with the communists.

However, once the UDF was created, the 1980s opposition groups found themselves facing the communists, the revived older parties, and other groups – all of them struggling for control over the state. If a group wanted to be a success in this situation, it had to produce both a new structure and a new ideology, and constitute itself as a political party. To remain in the UDF and not to develop so would have made them powerless and a tool for others to use. The alternative would have meant leaving the UDF and facing accusations of "splitting", "treason" and "selling out to the communists".

It is not then surprising that these groups started reforming along party models. Some even managed to reform along communist–party models, reproducing a typically communistic centralised hierarchical structure and authoritarian decision–making process. A case in point was the Human Rights Association. It developed a rigid structure and started recruiting members on a partisan basis, mainly among the ethnic Turks, whose rights it had defended in the past. However, when the ethnic Turks left to form their own party, the Association, though still represented in the UDF, became politically dead.

New people filled these new structures and some of the old oppositionists left. This withdrawal was seen as clearing the way for the "second wave" of the opposition. Unlike the first wave, composed of people who operated in the hostile communist environment and wanted a vague kind of democracy, the second wave formed in a friendlier post–communist climate and were clear on wanting political power in the name of a vague democracy. The new groups became the natural motors of further change: the first wave had either to integrate itself with them or be pushed out. Both, in fact, happened. The two "moderate" UDF splinter groups who failed to cross the 4 per cent threshold in the 1991 elections are an example of the latter.

Within six months of winning the 1991 elections, the UDF developed a rigid hierarchical structure which cut across the coalition parties. Local structures became bureaucratically linked to the central governing body of the Union, the Coordinating Council, by–passing the structures of the constituent parties. From a close–knit coalition the UDF turned into a loosely–knit party with a heavy apparat, numerous problems and few reasonable remedies. A most disturbing example of this process was the suspension, in July 1994, of the Democratic Party, the most influential party of the Union. The reason was deviation from the Council line.

The uncompromising "hardliner" attitude of the UDF against all "moderates" and the Councils' party building went well down with the electorate until the summer of 1993. Since then, the UDF has been losing popularity steadily. Currently, its vote is down to the "hard core" supporters. National surveys and local elections alike (in Veliko Tarnovo in June and in Sandansky in July) have revealed the hard–core UDF electorate to be significantly smaller than its BSP counterpart. Without losing legitimacy, the UDF did manage to squander a lot of support. The MRF draws its legitimacy from two complementary kinds of bigotry. First is the bigotry of an ethnic and religious minority which understands democratic representation in terms of ethnicity and religion: only an ethnic Turk or a Muslim can "understand" and thus "has the right to represent" ethnic Turks and Muslims in Bulgaria. Therefore, ethnic Turks and Muslims are expected to vote MRF as a matter of course.

Second, there is the bigotry of the majority: ethnic Bulgarians and Orthodox Christians are deemed to be different from the rest of the inhabitants of Bulgaria, and they constitute the overwhelming majority; democracy is based on majority rule; therefore, the Bulgarian Orthodox majority should rule the country, and anybody who is not happy is free to emigrate. However, so far the MRF has been supported by practically all ethnic Turks and most Muslims in Bulgaria, while only a handful of ethnic Bulgarians have joined, part of them highly principled persons, and the rest very much the opposite. For very unselfish or very selfish career reasons, MRF dignitaries are so keen on having a minority party that they pointedly avoid criticising

its leader for his authoritarian style. The MRF was thus mostly built personally by its leader in 1990. Since then, despite dissent and coup attempts by ex–followers, Mr Dogan has retained supreme executive authority in his party.

From an abstract point of view, this is often seen as a realistic strategy, given that the ethnic Turks still live in traditional patriarchical communities and possibly would not respect a non–authoritarian leader. On a more concrete level, however, it is revealing to learn that Mr Dogan has not allowed his party's accounts to be audited since its foundation four years ago. Nevertheless, Ahmed Dogan has been able to triumph over all challenges, and the party's legitimacy has not been questioned. Apparently, the MRF does not need to be democratic to be legitimate. It draws its legitimacy not from the situation within the party, but from the situation the party is placed in by outside forces.

All the other parties are democratic both in statute and in deed. Only the ones that have manifested enough behaviour of their own will be briefly discussed. In the current UDF coalition of about sixteen members (the number shifts as parties get expelled, suspended, or they return, or split inside, or unite with others), there are only two parties which are developed enough to merit separate attention. The first is the (at present still suspended) Democratic Party. It is in a class of its own, being the only party in Bulgaria that represents if not a class, at least a brand new social stratum: the so–called "restitutes", or persons who have benefited from the restoration of nationalised urban property. It is also historically legitimised through the pre–war party of the same name and, mutatis mutandis, of similar conservative leanings. Interestingly, these old–new wealthy persons, who owe their restored status to democracy, recently tend to lose interest in the DP – and, indeed, in UDF politics in general. It increasingly looks as if, after getting back their real estate, they care not for politics. And this may mean that the DP is losing part of its unique source of legitimacy.

The other UDF party of consequence is the Radical Democratic Party. In the inter–war period, it was a party of the left–of–center intelligentsia. Now it is right–of–center and has remained attractive to intellectuals. Its Chair also chairs the National Assembly, which in Bulgaria is a primary post of power. In the last few months, the RDP, together with the DP, have been opposing the radicalism of the UDF central leadership. Although the RDP is still a full UDF member, both parties might secede before the end of the year, leaving the UDF with second–rate formations as members.

Of the extra–Parliamentary parties with centrist potential, there are the Bulgarian Party Liberals, the Alternative Socialist Liberal Party, and the Green Party. If they could produce an united effort (which does not seem likely), they could become important. It is remarkable that the New Union for Democracy, a grouping consisting mostly of ex–UDF MPs and not a fully–fledged party, makes much more effective centrist politics than all these three parties put together.

The left–of–center is represented by the recent coalition of the Bulgarian Social Democratic party and the BSP splinter Citisens' Union for the Republic. The two make uneasy bed fellows: the BSDP draws its legitimacy from its glorious pre–war history, while the CUR can only boast of its recent split from the BSP. The Agrarian Union (or unions; the various Agrarians are always on the verge of reunification or

further splits) also draws on its glorious history, and has nothing to show in the present. Still, it managed to enter parliament in 1990 and would have matched the MRF in 1991 had it not split into a handful of quarelling factions.

A very simple pattern emerges. Parliamentary parties are rather authoritarian; authoritarianism is both a cause of their getting into Parliament and an effect of this. And, in both cases, it is a means to ensure discipline and unity of effort. Extra–Parliamentaary parties are non–authoritarian. Although objectively moderate and centrist, they have no chance on the big arena of politics, as they are riven with disagreements, both internal and among the different parties. Their traditional weak spot is leadership.

Leadership: Power as Privilege and Corruption

Charisma has not played an important part in Bulgarian party politics. Even if a leader does possess a modicum of charisma, it is not for this that s/he retains the leadership. Rather, leadership is regarded as a job requiring business qualities. Many leaders tend to regard their political position as a personal business – aimed principally at direct personal profit. It may be worth noting that this attitude does not necessarily entail corruption – if corruption is taken to mean that a politician agrees to do something s/he knows to be against the best interests of their party or nation in return for money or favours. Rather, it is in the tradition of both democratic and communist rule in Bulgaria to regard political power not as a position of service, but as a post of privilege. It is a question of using a public position for personal gain. The interests of the party or the nation tend to be situated at another level. Despite the fact that such lucrative stratagems occasionally get devastating coverage in the media (especially in papers controlled by opposing parties), such revelations, though usually believed by most of the rank–and–file, do not seem to have any effect on their allegiance. The rare politician who, on the contrary, makes a point of not engaging in such practices, risks the label of “naif” or, even worse, “idealist”, both being political synonyms of “misplaced”.

Currently it looks as if the only person exempt from such dismissive judgements is the President. The fact that he is not making a personal fortune while in office is not held against him for the moment. Corruption of the more trivial kind is universally believed to be ubiquitous. Reactions to it are, however, slightly different. When accusations of this kind appear in the media, they are usually vague and no facts are published, although they are declared to be in the possession of the publisher. The accused would threaten or occasionally even begin a libel suit; and usually there the matter ends. This, for example, is what happened when, in 1992, UDF Prime Minister Filip Dimitrov charged with corruption his own Defence Minister Dimitar Loudshev; or with accusations made both by and against trade union leader Konstantin Trenchev. Party adherents tend to disbelieve such accusations levelled against their own leaders, writing them off as “enemy stratagems”. The most common accusations are that the politician has been “bought” by a domestic business group or by a foreign political power. If proven to the public's satisfaction, such an allegation might kill a politician's career. As yet, such cases do not seem likely.

On the whole, in terms of image the UDF tends to lose more than the BSP when its leaders are accused of corruption. After all, the UDF came into existence in the name of a new political morality. As for the ex–communists, given the burden of the communist regime's inheritance, they can not be easily harmed by petty new accusations.

Rank–and–File: Clientelism

A collateral to the attitude of power–as–privilege is the clientelistic syndrome of the rank and file. It is most probably rooted in the traditionalistic character of practically all Bulgarian communities at the end of the 19th century, delayed in their development by the 500 years of Turkish domination. These communities lived by a collectivistic value system. The individualistic revolution which began after the liberation from the Turks and was concomitant with modernisation and urbanisation, was checked after the disaster of World War I, when large sections of the intelligentsia became communist–oriented. Nevertheless, the process of creating citisens and civil society continued to evolve in ups and downs, until the communist seisure of power in 1944 put a stop to the process. The communists opted for a collectivistic personality instead, and started grafting it upon the extant tradition–regulated small–community personality.

To solve problem situations which transcend their fixed roles in the community, individuals need outside help. If they do find it – in outside persons – they "borrow" their power, and become "clients" to these outside "patrons". In the pre–war years of democracy, such clientelism was based on family ties, common place of origin and/or political partisanship. Clients expected to solve their problems by receiving political appointments or other favours. These were granted not for particular services to the patron, but for just being des notres, for sharing with the patron a common origin or party affiliation. Clients would also expect to be used by the patron, but again only because they shared a common group identity with him/her, and not in return for specific favours received. In the years of communism, the Communist Party was the only one capable of providing such favours. Membership became a must – at least for the patron that wanted to get ahead; the family or place of origin ties remained as relevant as before.

Nowadays clientelism continues to be a major phenomenon in Bulgarian political life; it is being reproduced without significant changes. The newly born and the revived political formations inherited it from both the communist and democratic traditions. The clientelistic style may be largely to blame for the low popularity in the country of the Union of Democratic Forces – and for its steadily dropping popularity in the big cities. It looks as if, in the country, the old clientura of the ex–communists consisted of better respected persons (due to lifestyle, education and intelligence, but also to morals); and these people remained overwhelmingly faithful to their old party.

The new clientura of the UDF in the country was mostly formed of outsiders on the lookout for the chance of becoming arrivistes. They adopted an ultra–radical stance, accused the non–clientelist (the more reasonable and moderate) activists of collaboration with the communists, grabbed power posts in the UDF hierarchy and started losing votes steadily. Polls reveal that at present, in 1994, the UDF, which managed just to win the 1991 general elections, does not stand a chance against the BSP.

Party Image: Media Control

One of the basic features of the democratic past, which has been revived with success, has been the newspaper. Even in Turkish times newspapers of good quality, critical of the Porte or overtly revolutionary, would be printed in Constantinople and Bucharest and distributed in Bulgaria. The press between 1989 and 1992 resembled the press after 1878 in its aggressive style: it was free, often brutal and gross, manipulative and lively – and managed to remain so, despite attempts of parties and governments to bridle it. After 1992, things have been settling down. There are some 10 private, i. e. not party affiliated, national daily newspapers of consequence. The most influential of them are 24 Chasa (controlled by private business), Standart (ditto) Trud (trade union), Continent (left–of–center), Otechestven vestnik (center). There are also private local
newspapers, covering the country thoroughly and nearing national standards (e. g. the Plovdiv Maritsa). Bulgarians learned quickly to demand that news and commentary be separated, which has become part of the new rules of the game between journalists and the public.

Many private FM radios have sprung, mostly for music, commercials and local news; the National (state owned) Radio and Television is still the main national and foreign news source. Private TV channels were allowed by Parliament only recently, (in March 1994), and do not broadcast yet (although there were private political TV shows) on the state channels. Interestingly, it was the UDF government which, in 1992, tried to bring the media under state control again. After failing spectacularly to make the big private papers obey, the UDF Prime Minister declared that these papers would be "disregarded". Meanwhile, a campaign to practically "re–statify" the electronic media was launched: every item critical of the UDF government was denounced as "communist". The campaign succeeded with TV and – to a large extent – with the National Radio: besides being controlled by Parliament according to the Constitution, these establishments have a long tradition of obeying.

This should not be seen, however, as a fight between the "good" media and the "bad" state. The media are fully aware of their advantageous potential as institutions of opinion manipulation. Journalists who do not attempt to manipulate are a minority. The battle is over whether the media have the right to choose the manipulation, or someone else (the government or the parties) chooses it for them to execute. Politically, the negative feature of the media is that they are constantly attempting to manipulate the public; the positive side is that, especially in the case of the press, messages of manipulation do not emanate from the government, and are many and contradictory; so Bulgarians, especially older ones, who were used to read the

Communist Party newspapers between the lines, do not swallow much of the proffered stuff.

Doing the Job: Three Compromises

The spirit of consensus at the beginning of democratisation is doubtlessly a very important positive feature in Bulgarian political life; even should it be broken, it is bound to be remembered and to facilitate compromise between parties in situations of crisis. Moreover, it might not have arisen in the first place: it is something quite novel in Bulgarian politics. Another new trait, which has appeared only in the last six months, is that parties and the government have started to trust independent experts of political analysis, rather than relying exclusively on in–house advice. The recognition that there are limits to vulgar politicising and that there is an outside community of experts who aim at objectivity looks very promising.

Compromising with the communists: the case of the Constitution.

In four and a half years of post–communism, Bulgaria survived three Parliaments, four prime–ministers and five governments (plus several cabinet reshuffles); two presidents; and three sets of local governments. One of the reasons why the country did survive may be the fact that all these changeovers took place without practically any violation of existing laws and according to provided procedures. This commitment to doing things by the book even under most pressing circumstances should help understand why Bulgarians preferred to "waste" time on a new Constitution, when, for example, it was clear that the lack of new financial and market legislation would mean in hunger for the country back in 1990. In contrast, almost all other ex–communist states chose another option and started with specific laws.

This other approach may have seemed more practical; besides, the UDF was still in opposition then and radicals were warning that the new Constitution was bound to be communist–oriented. Yet the UDF decided to compromise. It seemed that for Bulgarians a new Constitution would carry enormous symbolic significance. This was apparently seen by the UDF and taken into account when estimating practical returns. It did not follow to the letter the country's first Constitution, passed in the 19th century following the liberation from the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria remained a republic in the 1990s. But it did imitate that original Constitution in its democratic spirit. It enlarged, for example, the scope of individual rights and restored private property. There are "time bombs" in the text, and a case of dealing with one of them follows.

Compromising with "internal" nationalism: the case of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms.

Ethnic minorities in Bulgaria are constitutionally non–existent. The Constitution does not in principle grant any group rights. It is presupposed that ethnic minority members will get enough defence of their rights on and individual basis. One of the new institutions which this Constitution established was the Constitutional Court: an independent body of judges pronouncing on cases where an interpretation of the Constitution is necessary. One of the first cases it had to examine was the case of the ethno–religious Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Some BSP MPs were claiming that the MRF was a political party based on ethnicity, therefore unconstitutional

(which it was), so the party should be banned from the general elections of 1991 (which should not have happened). The Court declared the MRF legal, as it had already been registered under the election law, which did not prohibit such parties.

This was probably bad constitutionalism. but it was sound judgement. For good or bad, the MRF had become the only party to represent the Turkish minority – and this minority simply had to be represented in Parliament. To ban this party might have engendered civil strife, and apparently the judges felt the consensus command: "no blood".

Compromising with "external" nationalism: the case of Macedonia.

The neutrality of the Army at the time of the anti–communist coup in 1989 set the happy precedent of non–intervention of the Army in politics. This was furthered by the prompt depolitisation of the Army. This newly acquired military placidity was patently demonstrated when Bulgaria became the first country in the world to recognise the ex–Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (together with all the others ex–Yugoslav states) in January 1992.

The military, along with all Bulgarians, were weaned on the idea that Macedonians were ethnic Bulgarians, unfortunately under Serbian and Greek domination. The decision to recognise Macedonia was taken by the President; it put an end to territorial and national claims that were centuries old and were deeply ingrained in the national psyche. At the same time, the declaration paid courtesy to "external" nationalists: it said explicitly that Bulgaria, while recognising the Macedonian state, did not recognise a Macedonian nation.

For short–sighted Macedonians this meant non–recognition: for Bulgarian nationalists, it meant a betrayal of "our brothers living in Macedonia"; yet the overwhelming reaction both in Bulgaria and Macedonia was one of relief. Bulgaria was relinquishing its territorial claims and launching a new style Balkan behaviour. Paradoxically, Western Europe was infuriated; comments were made that Bulgaria should have waited for the European Community to decide on recognition first. The Community demonstrated that it did not understand how precarious peace on the Balkans is, and how important prompt reactions can be.

The Electorate

It would seem logical to divide the electorate into urban and rural, for two reasons. First, in 1991 cities voted overwhelmingly pro–UDF, and villages – pro–BSP, which made the vote–locality correlation patent. Second, a locality–medium of influence correlation was assumed at the time: citisens, being more individualistic and atomised,
would be influenced politically mainly through the media; while villagers, being more collectivistic, would tend to adhere to a local consensus and usually would judge media messages with the help of local political pundits.

Fieldwork has revealed that, although broadly true, this assumption needs specification. Researchers presupposed that a vote in the villages would not be a truly "democratic" vote in the sense of it being based exclusively on informed and rational individual political choice. Obviously enough, the dependent members of a village family (especially the elderly) would "naturally" be swayed by the political advice of the person they are dependent upon. Moreover, the social space between the families is organised in fairly stable "networks" for exchange of material and spiritual goods and services. This is typical and trivial enough for village communities.

Also typical is the fact that political ideas, patterns of behaviour and direct influence can circulate through such networks. What is not so trivial is the fact that networks of similar functionality were found to exist in cities as well. Urban society in this country proved to be less atomistic than expected. It should not be assumed that such urban networks are basically rural networks simply translated into a new milieu through a kind of diffusion process. The urban networks are generated in the city itself. Their primary cause seems to be the mass migration in Bulgaria.

In the 20 years following World War II, about 30 per cent of the population changed from rural to urban. Before the war the ratio was 70 per cent rural to 30 urban; by the mid–60s it had become 40 rural to 60 urban. Peasants would leave the villages to become urban factory workers; in the new place they would be virtually alone. Even if the migration was done on a group basis, such groups would as a rule be broken quickly by the pressures of the new milieu. The only place where such a "displaced" individual would look for social assistance and contacts would be the same place where they earned their living: the factory.

Given their traditionalistic mentality, such persons expect not to produce an infrastructure of their new urban lives, but to have it provided – like it was provided by their village community. Therefore, factory managers were expected to act in a paternalistic manner, providing housing, recreation and holiday basis, extra education and child care. Housing was a traditionally bad problem in such circumstances; getting it in a situation of constant shortage was rightly considered a privilege.

So here we have a group of ex–peasants–become workers, urbanised together through the offices of their factory management, living together in the same apartment block provided by the factory, spending holidays in the same resort provided by the factory, and sending their kids to the same kindergarten provided by the factory. In all this they would still be different from the urban aborigines who, even if they worked in the same factory, would not need its paternalistic provisions to the same extent.

This lifestyle engenders, of course, strong cohesive forces within the migrant group; it becomes a network in the above mentioned sense. In communist times political influence did not circulate through such networks, as politics was something for the "governing" alone. But when, with the advent of democracy, politics become the people's business as well, the urban networks were in place and ready. And they have become politically significant.

Networks: Collectivistic Vote

With this in mind, when we go into the field, we test all communities studied, both rural and urban, for the presence of networks. To invent a Parkinsonian formula, the magnitude of the "network effect" is directly proportional to the physical distance from the capital of the country and inversely proportional to the number of network members. And the chance of political influence circulation in the network is directly proportional to the circulating of privilege in the network. In practice this means that urban networks would be exclusively prone to influence by the BSP: these networks were formed in communist times and members would be grateful for their lowly, yet privileged status to the communists. Theoretically, rural networks, formed on a traditional basis, could be influenced by any party; however, in practice they are again influenced mostly by the BSP, which appeals to a traditionalistic, collectivistic and less than sophisticated mentality.

Traditionalistic network effects are most visible in small, mono–ethnic and relatively isolated villages. Here, it becomes very clear that feelings may be an individual matter, but thoughts are elaborated in common by the whole family; political attitudes are arrived at after habitual communal discussions. In this way, the entire community generates attitudes.

Irrespective of their content, attitudes result in two types of political behaviour: reactive and active. Reactive political behaviour includes actions of the citisen which are the consequence of actions of the authorities (independent of whether these actions are directed at the citisen or not). Active political behaviour is the vote and the activities connected with voting. All citisen activities that aim at the use of authority and politics for personal gain (career, connections and so forth) should be considered separately. These actions can be classified as quasi–political behaviour, and they play a rather significant role (see Clientelism above). Quasi–political behaviour, oriented towards the improvement of an individual's social standing through a change in conditions, is virtually completely motivated by the frameworks and values of the specific community or network. In this sense, this kind of behaviour is locally rooted and its concrete patterns are of conjectural local interest only.

Reactive behaviour, aimed at the amelioration of an individual's social status in existing conditions, is also motivated locally and can be interpreted with success only at the level of the local network. Active behaviour, in contrast to the other two types, does not pursue any kind of clear and defined aim of the individual. It has no direct link to the individual's social status, the latter being defined almost exclusively by tradition.

From the point of view of the traditional rural networks, this type of behaviour is situated in the range from "a waste of time" to "doing evil". Left to the community alone, this kind of behaviour would not exist. But it is not left to the community: it is being dictated from the centre of power – the capital city to which the community is by tradition subordinated, and the centre towards whose behaviour there is traditional conformity. And conformism is one of the key behavioural components of any traditional community. For this reason, the vote – and the whole inter–electoral and

pre–electoral problematic connected with it – comes as something alien. But it is a something that must be accepted and acted out. Otherwise, ultimately, "we go against the authorities" – which is "not the done thing".

The urban networks are differently situated: they are as islands in an amorphous sea of free agents, indulging in anonymous actions, which need to be motivated on a purely individual level. In this way, many city dwellers have evolved a behavioural complex which is motivated purely – or to a very great extent – on the individual level. When faced with voting, these city dwellers, in contrast to villagers or urban network members, can connect their voting behaviour to an already existing structure – but a structure which is of their own making, and not a structure imposed from the outside. For this reason, their voting behaviour is to a much greater extent individualised and
rationalised. It is, however, to be noted that such an effect, while very obvious in the big cities like Sofia and Plovdiv, is almost unobservable in small towns like Ihtiman or Byala.

Messages and Manipulation

It seems that the way in which democratic politics is received has not changed significantly in comparison with the period between the two World Wars. Locally, the "modernistic" messages coming out of Sofia are inevitably translated into a traditional" language. In this translation, what is most frequently lost is precisely that which is essential from the point of view of Sofia. The result can be a rather absurd dialogue. Here is one typical illustration:

Sofia: "Communists – out of power!"
Village: "Good! Our mayor is a good man. (He happens to be a Communist)".
Sofia: Up with the UDF! Zhelyu (President Zhelev) is a traitor!
Village: Exactly, we are all for Zhelyu, for the UDF. (The same pattern holds for Dogan, the MRF leader).

A scandalous conclusion could be that between two–thirds and three–quarters of Bulgarian voters do not take part actively in the democratic process – because they do not vote for "individual" motives. (We assume that a politically motivated vote presupposes an informed choice aimed at individual maximisation of profit in a situation where political values are integrated into the values system of an individual and have no less a legitimacy than non–political values).

This being the case, under existing democratic conditions (meaning that the authorities do not hinder these people from becoming active participants), in relation to such voters the authorities are not in the role of a democracy, but of a dictatorship and a manipulation. A dictatorship, because voters are coerced to obey the democratic rules of the game"; and a manipulation, because, once understanding the difficulties in communication, the centre can use them – and does use them – for its own gain, stimulating the periphery towards a behaviour that is profitable to the centre.

One of the possible manipulative conclusions – successfully verified during the election campaigns – is that it is senseless to "explain to the people" a given political line. At best the people would interpret the line in their own way, with unforeseeable results. On the other hand, one could push the suggestion that a given political line is the line of the authorities, of the "new behavioural fashion" approved by the centre. The aim would be to switch on the conformity complex. Also, local agitators have been successfully employed as "translators" of the centre's messages into the "local" language in such a way as to ensure that the translation fits the intentions of the centre. The reciprocal message that the center is getting "from below" is that a party needs an electorate, but that the electorate does not necessarily need a party.

Opinion Polls: Consistency

An interesting insight to voter attitudes may be gained through reactions to polling. No political opinion polls were conducted in Bulgaria during the communist dictatorship. The first was made only in December 1989. Pollsters at the time were dubious: they feared that respondents, who had all their lives learned to dissociate word from deed, would lie routinely when answering the questionnaire and produce multitudes of valueless artefacts.

As it turned out, respondents for the most part would answer quite truthfully, making the poll meaningful. However, an unexpected phenomenon emerged: a respondent would answer different questions as if his or her political attitudes and position varied from question to question, frequently to opposite extremes. The phenomenon was attributed to the lack of "political personality" in the mentality of such respondents, who were numerous (about 20 per cent initially). An ad hoc "inconsistency scale" was designed, it being supposed that this phenomenon would trouble pollsters for quite some years.

Unexpectedly, within 12 months such inconsistencies had disappeared altogether, and answers within one questionnaire followed an infallible (and rather dull) pattern. The most probable explanation seems to be the simplest: people learned where they stood with politics and began to understand the kind of choices involved. This positive individual reaction to a formidable social challenge allows one to end on a surprisingly optimistic note.

Sofia
July – August 1994

Note. The conclusions of this paper are based on repeated representative quantitative opinion polls, quota elite and media polls, qualitative political anthropology surveys, and in–depth studies made by colleagues of the author and/or the author personally, beginning in the winter of 1989.